

Xander Bogaerts: The next Red Sox superstar

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(Photo by [Jillian Souza](#))

How a young shortstop from Aruba signed with the Boston Red Sox and emerged as the team's best prospect in more than a decade.

On a cool summer afternoon, McCoy Stadium, home of the Pawtucket Red Sox, is quiet. Stadium staffers shuffle around the ballpark, preparing for the evening



Bogaerts points to the sky following a double against the Lehigh Valley IronPigs. (Photo by [Jillian Souza/Pawtucket Red Sox](#))

festivities while some scouts settle into their seats with notebooks and pens in hand nearly four hours before the first pitch. Players are on the field, taking batting practice, quietly chatting with coaches and taking ground balls while preparing for another day of the grind in Triple-A.

Next to the cage, standing a good five feet away from his closest teammate, stands the slender, 6'3, 185 pound PawSox shortstop Xander Bogaerts, fiddling his bat around with both hands, like a lumberjack with his axe preparing to chop down a tree.

Bogaerts steps into the cage, appearing slightly jittery with excitement while displaying a sense of zen, calmness with his facial expressions. As the batting practice pitch approaches the plate, Bogaerts takes a big leg kick and drives his hips and hands through the strike zone.

CRACK!

As the ball soars over the right field bleachers of McCoy Stadium, Bogaerts nonchalantly sets up for his next swing, not taking a moment to admire his last drive.

"It's an explosion," Red Sox pitcher Brandon Workman says of each hit off Bogaerts' bat. "It's one of those sounds where everybody is hitting and then it comes off his bat and it just turns heads. In a group of a bunch of good hitters, he still turns heads with the way that the ball sounds off his bat."

This is what Xander Bogaerts does every single day.

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The youth movement is already underway in baseball. The Angels' Mike Trout, the Nationals' Bryce Harper and the Orioles' Manny Machado have taken over the game of baseball at the ages of 20 and 21. In just their second year in Major League Baseball, all three have emerged among the best at their positions both at the plate and in the field. Both Trout and Harper won the Rookie of the Year honors in their respective leagues last season while Machado was on pace to demolish the single season records for doubles at the midway point of this season.

In a sport that often takes years of development to be among the best, many young players are accelerating through minor league systems and making their major league debuts before they are legally allowed to have a sip of alcohol.



Bogaerts at Spring Training in Fort Myers.

Xander Bogaerts, a 20 year old shortstop from Aruba, represents the closest thing the Red Sox have to a Trout, Harper or Machado in terms of talent and overall potential.

“Whenever somebody compares you to somebody like that, especially at a young age, it feels great and it’s an honor to be in that kind of group,” Bogaerts says.

He is the best Red Sox prospect in nearly ten years.

He is potentially the next Red Sox superstar, but Xander wasn’t the Bogaerts brother that the organization scouted first.

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Bogaerts and his fraternal twin brother Jair were born on October 1, 1992 to their mother Sandra Brown, their father and their sister Chandra.

“I’m older by one minute,” Jair says. “[Xander] would always argue about that so if you ever ask him that question, you would hear him say that if it was a normal birth, he was on the bottom and he would have come out first. Because my mom had a C-section, I was on the top so that is why I was first. It was always a discussion that we had, but at the end of the day, I’m still the older one by one minute.”

Bogaerts’ father left the family when the twins were just three years old and their mother raised Xander and Jair on her own. Chandra was seven years older than the two boys and left Aruba to study abroad when she was 17 years old. She currently lives in Hong Kong with her newly-married husband.

The family grew up in a four-bedroom home located in San Nicolaas, a quiet community located twelve miles southeast of Oranjestad, the capital of Aruba. With picture perfect weather year round, San Nicolaas was an ideal place for the Bogaerts family to live.



Bogaerts’ uncle, Glenroy Brown, got him and his twin brother Jair started in baseball.

“We had mostly everything where we were growing up,” Jair says. “My mom just taught us that we had to work hard for whatever we wanted to live. She was pretty much a very spiritual person so that helped us out and that we could rely on the Lord pretty much and that helped us throughout our career in helping us be stronger kids that we are mentally.”

Every week, the Bogaerts family would go to church before the twins were sent to Sunday school. On Sundays when Xander and Jair had a day game for their travel teams, their mother would find a way for them to make it to church.

"[Christianity] makes you a stronger person everyday," Jair says. "Reading the word of the Lord every day makes you confident and made you try to go out and have a better game. If you have a bad day, you open up the Bible and take a look at scripture. Then you would go out and have a good day."

The boys were first introduced to baseball by their uncle, Glenroy Brown, who was a former professional baseball player in Aruba and a little league coach with nearly 20 years of coaching experience.

"I probably was three or four years old and in my grandmother's backyard with my uncle," Xander says. "Our family is a family about baseball. A lot of great players. If they lived in this era, probably a lot of my family would have been signed already. It was just way back then and there weren't a lot of scouts who lived in Aruba and stuff so I just had the baseball stuff in me and my uncle and he just practiced with me and my brother and it just went off from there."

Uncle Brown used a variety of different techniques to help the young twins improve their game and take their games to the next step.

"We used to hit with plastic balls and plastic bats," Xander says. "One of the key things that we used to do was that we used hit with almonds. Even in the offseason, I still go out there and do the same thing. That was the main thing that we did for a long time in Aruba."

"It curves and sometimes you get those skinny ones that go all over the place so it was nice," Xander says.

"It was so awesome," Jair says of the time working with his uncle. "He always said that almonds would give us better eyesight because the almond was small so it would give us better eyesight for the time that we had to hit a baseball. They would look bigger when we were in the game. He also had a car tire wrapped around the almond tree and he would make us hit 75-100 times and that would make us pretty much stronger than the competition that we had at that time at our age. We were pretty much ahead of the kids at our age."

From a young age, the Bogaerts twins played on dirt field and helped their travel teams make several Latin American tournaments, something they participated in every summer while in Aruba. In 2010, they helped Aruba win the Senior League World Series in Bangor, Maine, the first time the country had won any such title.

"No matter which league we played in, [Jair and I] were always together," Xander says. "We were never separate and especially in my first year [playing in the Dominican Summer League], it was one of the best years. Me and my brother playing together in pro ball. You couldn't ask for anything better than that so it was really fun."



The Bogaerts family at the Senior League World Series representing Aruba.

"There was always somebody around so we were never alone," Jair says. "If I wanted to play catch, I would just had to say, 'Hey, do you want to play catch?' and he was always around so we would always play catch together, hit rocks and break windows, but it was fun growing up with a brother like Xander."

"We would always be competitive, throughout the season, we would always try to hit better or pitch better," Jair says. "[Xander] was always known for being a better pitcher than and I was always known for being a better hitter, but he was small. We were always each other's number one fans so that's what I enjoyed very much."

While they were on the field playing in tournaments as kids, Jair recognized that there was something different about his brother on the baseball field.

"From a small kid, he always did stuff that nobody his age would be able to do," Jair remembers. "It was pretty much a matter of time when he was going to turn into a really good player but it was always in everyone's minds that he would become someone special."

While they spent a lot of time together, Xander and Jair personalities were very different when they were growing up.

"I'm more of the open guy and he's more of the, not anti-social, but he's more of a closed person and personality," Jair says.

"I've always been a pretty quiet guy," Xander says. "I don't really go out a lot so I try to stay out of the most trouble as possible. Nothing good happens at night so that's why it's good to stay at home."

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Scouts began to track Xander and Jair, a stocky catcher, when they were around 15 years old. Xander was contacted by the Orioles, the Indians, the Yankees, the Phillies and the Astros before the brothers had their big break when Red Sox international scout Mike Lord saw the two of them at a tryout the team held.



The Bogaerts family before the twins sign their first contract.

"They had this tryout and my brother had the chicken pox so he wasn't at the first try out," Jair recalls. "I did very good. I can remember telling one of the scouts, 'Hey, I have this brother who's the best shortstop on the whole island and I don't think you want to miss out on the opportunity of seeing him, but he has the chicken pox.'"

Xander was not allowed out of the house at night because of his illness, but the brothers cajoled their mother into letting the ill-Bogaerts tryout for the Red Sox.

"I said, 'Hey, just one night and let them see what you've got,'" Jair says. "The next night, we had a simulated game and he came out and he had two or three hits right off the bat and then from that moment on, that was it."

"It was very dangerous and I had to ask my mom, 'Hey, can I go?'" because they asked for me to come and then she said, 'Ok, go,'" Xander says. "I did a tryout, did great and they liked me. Then they came back again in two weeks, saw me play and I signed."

The pair officially signed with the Red Sox on August 29, 2009 at Fenway Park after they played an international tournament in Maine. Xander received a \$410,000 bonus while Jair received a \$180,000 bonus. The opportunity to sign and play in the same organization as his brother was a huge factor for Xander.

“[The Red Sox] were very serious, very serious about it,” Xander says. “They wouldn’t tell you something one day and then another day, they would change their mind. They were really serious business and they also wanted both of us. Some teams maybe wanted me and not my brother or they wanted my brother and not me or something like that so it’s just that they both wanted both of us.”

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From left to right: Jair and Xander Bogaerts at Fenway Park after they signed their first professional contracts.

The twins got their start in professional baseball not far from their home: at the Red Sox’s Dominican Academy in late 2009.

Culturally, the transition away from home was easy. Xander, who speaks English, Spanish, Dutch and Papiamentu (an Aruban-Creole language), knocked down any language barrier. Leaving home and adjusting to the higher level of talent was the tougher challenge on the youngest Bogaerts.

“I could’ve done great in the Dominican, but it was hard,” Xander says. “In Aruba, we never had pitchers throw 90 miles per hour. You go into the Dominican and you see 90 miles per hour every day so it was great. I had to do a lot of adjustments. That was one of the toughest years but I did good, lucky for me, but it was tough.”

The transition to the Dominican was easier for Jair.

“It was pretty easy because we were together,” Jair says. “In the Dominican, we were together so we wouldn’t miss home that much because we had each other. They just told us to come prepared and ready to play baseball and you’ll be fine.”

While the pitching and competition was much tougher than it was back in Aruba, Xander flourished immediately, hitting a team-high .314 with three home runs, seven doubles and five triples, 42 RBI and 39 runs in 63 games on route to being named the Red Sox’s Latin Program Player of the Year.

The transition to harder competition was tougher for Jair, who .170 in 46 games. As a result, he had to repeat the Dominican Summer League as Xander moved up to Single-A Greenville.

“It wasn’t really hard [seeing him move to Greenville],” Jair says. “I wouldn’t say that it was frustrating because I know that my first year wasn’t very good so I had to do it all over again so it wasn’t that bad of me being in the DR and I spent that summer speaking my native language so it wasn’t that hard.”

Xander flourished in Greenville in 2011, finishing third on the team with 16 home runs, leading all players with a .509 slugging percentage and driving in 42 runs despite only playing in 72 games. Jair loved watching his brother accelerate his prospect status in the Red Sox farm system.

“It was awesome,” Jair says. “I can remember every night I would go on [the minor league baseball] website and look up what he did. Some days, I would tell some of the guys, “Hey, my brother is going to hit a homerun today” and then he would go out and do it. Then I would tell the guys, “Hey, did you see that?”

After the 2011 season, Jair was traded as part of the deal that sent former Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein to the Chicago Cubs.

“Being away from each other for the first time was tough, but you know, the Red Sox told me if I had any problems, just go to them and get advice so it was really good. It helped me a lot,” Xander says.

“It was pretty hard,” Jair says. “I really couldn’t believe it when I got traded to the Cubs and my brother couldn’t either. We just had to live with it. We couldn’t do anything about that so we just had to deal with it. It was what it was. We had to play baseball and support each other as much. We would just call each other every day and make sure everything was alright. It would just make everything better.”

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Xander started his second professional season in High-A Salem and tore it up, hitting .302 with 15 home runs, 64 RBI, 27 doubles and three triples in 104 games and 384 ABs. In August at the age of 19, Bogaerts was promoted to Double-A Portland, making him the youngest player in the Eastern League.

The toughest part of Xander’s rapid ascension through the farm system has been the pitching.



Bogaerts at Single-A Salem

"If the pitchers hear about you or know about you, they throw you differently, a lot of off speed," Xander says. "I would say, if you have good teammates and they make you feel comfortable in the environment, it makes you play a lot more easier. No matter how hard the game is, once I have fun, I play good so that's one of my successes."

Xander spent the rest of 2012 season and the beginning of the 2013 season in Portland before being called up to Triple-A Pawtucket in June of this year, making his PawSox debut during a doubleheader against the Buffalo Bisons as the youngest player in the International League. In the second game of the twin bill, Bogaerts cranked an 88-mph fastball from Justin Germano, a pitcher with MLB experience, and knocked it over everything in McCoy stadium.

Bisons left fielder Ricardo Nanita didn't move when the ball was hit. He knew it was gone.

"He just absolutely crushed it," Pawtucket manager Gary DiSarcina said after Xander's Triple-A debut. "You haven't seen many 20-year-olds hit balls like that. The ball got real small real quick. It just exploded off his bat."

Bisons catcher Sean Ochinko flinched like he had heard an explosion after Bogaerts hit the ball, a testament to the sound the ball made off the bat.

The way the ball comes off of Bogaerts' bat has been something many of his current and former teammates have taken notice of.

"He's got juice to all fields and the ball just comes off his bat different than it does a lot of other people," PawSox second baseman Brock Holt says. "Whenever you hit a ball good or someone hits a ball good you can tell just by the sound. It's loud, it's louder than a lot of other guys. I can't really explain how it sounds."

"The way the ball comes off his bat, you'll see him mishit a ball and it will still go over the fence," Workman says. "When he does hit one good, they go miles."

DiSarcina, the former minor-league coordinator and assistant to the general manager for the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, has on numerous occasions compared Xander to another young phenom that he was around: Mike Trout.

"I saw Mike Trout for two years with the Angels," DiSarcina says. "Two different players, power is pretty much equal. Two different tool sets, he's an outfielder with terrific speed, plus-speed. Xander doesn't have the speed. Mike was a better base runner. Mike was a little bit more polished at this age, but Mike played, pretty much until August in Double-A before he got called up. [Mike] never went Double-A, Triple-A, called up. He went straight up from Double-A. The best one I can compare him to is Mike. Just the potential is there."

Bogaerts loves to watch another former Red Sox farmhand that he is often compared to: Los Angeles Dodgers shortstop Hanley Ramirez.



On the field, Bogaerts looks up to a former Red Sox prospect, Hanley Ramirez.

"I like Hanley, the way he plays," Xander says. "I'm not saying his attitude or anything, just the way he plays. I just like the way he plays. I don't have the same speed as him"

"Even just the way [Hanley] dresses, the way he looks on the field. He looks so loose and comfortable, just having fun out there. Sometimes he gets too loose though, but that's him."

Many of Xander's current and former teammates feel that he not only provides a looseness similar to Ramirez, but also leadership in the clubhouse.

"He keeps it fun and interesting," PawSox outfielder Jackie Bradley Jr. says. "You'll constantly see him playing games and pretty much keeps you focused on being happy about the little things. We play baseball every single day so knowing that you can do stuff outside of baseball that entertains you and keeps you having fun so when you have to focus on the game, you'll be fully prepared."

"He just plays hard," Red Sox pitcher Drake Britton says. "He comes to the field and sells out every day. That translates into his numbers and how he performs. He just loves to play baseball and he has fun doing it. Just his effort, every single day."

"He's just a great guy," Workman says. "He's fun to be around. He always has a smile on his face. Around the clubhouse, he's a great teammate, great. He always has good things to say. Just a good guy to have around in your clubhouse."

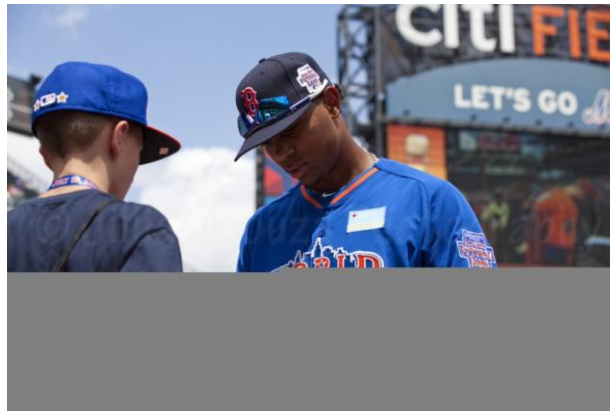
At only twenty years old, Bogaerts brings a very mature approach to the plate that is unusual for someone of his age.

"Since I was growing up, I always hit good to right field so I just worked a lot on hitting to the opposite field," Xander says. "Once you keep your hands inside the ball, it makes it a lot more easier and once you try to hit a lot of home runs, that's when you tend to go through struggles so, it's something that I've always had, I guess."

The power that Bogaerts brings has impressed scouts all around baseball.

"He is in the top 3 or 4 [for power potential for prospects in the minors]," a major league scout says. "There's Miguel Sano from the Twins and he's got a lot of power but Bogaerts is up there. I think he can be a consistent 25 to 30 home runs a year, which, I would take."

"In his first game when he got called up to Double-A, he got called up the day after me to Double-A and in his first game, he hit a homerun to right center in Akron that went a mile," Workman says. "It was one of the more impressive things that I've ever seen, him going the other way with the ball and hitting it a mile and since then, I've seen him do that numerous times. That's what stands out to me, his ability to drive the ball to the opposite field like he does."



Bogaerts signs autographs for fans at the Futures Game. (Photo by Jillian Souza)

Two of the biggest questions about Bogaerts are how good his defense will be and where he will play in the infield once he gets the call to the majors. Bogaerts' ascent has often been compared to Manny Machado's rise in the Orioles farm system. Machado, a natural shortstop, moved to third base when a need arose for Baltimore.

"[Xander] hasn't done enough to say that he can't play short because he's got the natural ability," a major league scout says. "I'd like to see a little bit more body control, but you don't want to sacrifice his athleticism either. He needs a little bit more time there, I think. The rest of the season playing short would be good for him and then you see where he is next year. We'll have to see how he fills out. He's very big as it is. In this organization, I'd put him at third and have [José] Iglesias play shortstop."

As his double-play partner at second base, Holt has been impressed by Bogaerts' defense.

"He's been great," Holt says. "Up to this point, I've never really seen him play or anything, just heard rumors about moving him around, having to move off of shortstop, but from what he has showed me and as hard as he works, he wants to play shortstop and he's got the ability to stick at the position. He goes out everyday and plays hard and, like I said, wants to get better every single day."

When asked what position he would play if he could never play shortstop again, Bogaerts paused. His answer was surprising.

"I used to like pitching," Bogaerts says. "I was 16, throwing 85 maybe, but I was 16. It had room for improvement. The Red Sox could have signed me as a pitcher or as a hitter, I used to hit a little bit so they signed me as a hitter. But pitcher, I like pitching. I don't know man, that's a good question. Second base, third base. As long as I'm in the infield, I don't think that we'll have a problem."

With Will Middlebrooks' struggles and eventual demotion, third base has been a weak point for the 2013 Red Sox. Many have been clamoring for the Red Sox to call up Bogaerts to put him at third base. Both Bogaerts and DiSarcina are unsure how the shortstop would fare if he were to be called up right now.

"It's tough to project because he's so young," DiSarcina says. "He's 20 years old."

"To be honest, I have no idea," Bogaerts says. "Who knows? Hopefully if I get the call up, I'll just go out and play the way that I know how to play. I'm not trying to be Mike Trout, Harper or Pujols. I'm just trying to be me and that has what's carried me up until now."

"I think he'd struggle," a major league scout says. "He needs to work on his plate discipline and needs to cut down on his strike zone. Pitch recognition still needs some work so I think he'd be exposed by big league secondary stuff."

Bogaerts feels that plate discipline is his biggest weakness at the moment.

"I've gotten better," Bogaerts says. "The better your plate discipline is, the better you know what pitches you can hit and what pitches you can't. You'll be a lot more successful. No swinging at pitcher's pitches. Just knowing what pitches you can hit."

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(Photo by Jillian Souza/Pawtucket Red Sox)

Five years down the road, nobody knows where Xander Bogaerts will be. He could be a superstar, MVP candidate hitting third in the Red Sox lineup for years to come. He could also be a bust and out of baseball. While the road is uncertain, Bogaerts knows exactly how he wants to be known around baseball when he finally gets called up.

"I want to be known as a good player, Bogaerts says. "All-around player, doing everything and getting the little things right. Just playing with full effort, kind of like Pedroia."

Considering Pedroia's recent eight-year, \$110M extension, Bogaerts is looking at the right person to follow the lead of in Boston. Whenever Bogaerts' time in the big leagues comes, he will be ready to contribute in any way possible.

"I'm trying to win a championship," Bogaerts says. "Trying to win as many games as possible. Who knows if it's this year or next year or the year after. If I'm up this year, I'm trying to help the team win because they're in a really good position right now, just trying to help, no matter what in whatever way."

Source : <http://sportsreelboston.com/xander-bogaerts-the-next-red-sox-superstar/>